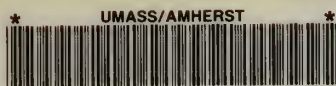


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An Occasional Paper

## **THE POWER OF THE URBAN CANVAS: Paint, Politics, and Mural Arts Policy**

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by  
Maura E. Greaney  
Master of Science in Public Affairs Program  
University of Massachusetts Boston  
**Outstanding Case Study Award for Class of 2002**

January 2003

University of Massachusetts Boston

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Boston Mural Crew directed by Mike Womble, *Faces of Dudley*, 1995


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This case study could not have been written without the cooperation and insight of the artists and administrators who create mural art in cities. You are visionaries. Thanks to those who made themselves available for my many questions, especially in the beginning when I knew so little. Your art makes the world a more colorful and meaningful place.

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The Author

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Maura E. Greaney is a 2002 graduate of the University of Massachusetts Boston Master of Science in Public Affairs Program. This paper received the Outstanding Case Study Award for the Class of 2002 from the McCormack Institute. Ms. Greaney currently works as Grant Development Coordinator for the City of Woburn, Massachusetts.

## ABSTRACT

*In cities across America, outdoor mural paintings have brought public art to the urban landscape. Paint and politics have been splashed upon city walls for decades, replacing bleak, often graffitied, exteriors with vibrant color. But this transformation runs deeper than the artistry of the murals; the real works of art are the changes these collaborative projects inspire within communities. Mural projects mobilize communities to articulate dreams, express frustrations, and most importantly, consider strategies for change. Thus, they are a worthy consideration for public policymakers.*

*This case study traces the contemporary mural movement in three cities: Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. It examines the evolution of mural art from impromptu political protest (used by largely African-American and Chicano communities to challenge the political and cultural establishment in the 1960s) to programs administered and funded by municipalities. This paper explains how mural arts projects can establish communal bonds in urban centers rife with racial, social, and economic divides; how they can build social and intellectual capital in “at-risk” youth; and how they can enhance the physical perception and quality of urban neighborhoods.*

*Through reliance on secondary sources and personal interviews, this case study also develops an historical account of Boston’s mural arts initiatives. Additional research was gathered through correspondence, visits to mural centers, and viewing murals onsite. Both the murals and the processes by which they are created offer narratives about community events and experiences.*

*This study concludes that Boston should strengthen its existing mural program, the Boston Mural Crew, in order to maximize its efficacy. This could be accomplished by promoting murals as cultural tourism, devising new economic strategies, facilitating coordination between arts agencies, fostering public and media relations, and protecting artists’ rights. Municipal mural programs must be integrated within the urban environment to be effective: they should beautify surroundings while serving a higher educational or social purpose. A meaningless public mural is a missed opportunity. Policymakers must let community-based murals be their muse. Many of these projects have inspired ingenuity in urban neighborhoods, so too, could they succeed in the realms of community and economic development.*

# INTRODUCTION

## *Background*

Mural art is found in major cities across America. These public paintings exist as part of the cityscape, bringing art to thousands of people, many in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Urban murals sometimes go unnoticed, often are taken for granted, or become a mere afterthought to someone on a bustling city street. But murals can be thought provoking, stimulating passersby to consider their content and context. Murals often infuse social and political messages in their designs, and in doing so, have the potential to infuriate and perplex their audiences. With so many possibilities from the benign to explosive, how and why are murals painted on city walls?

Paint and politics have been splashed upon city walls for decades, resulting in a proliferation of vibrant color on formerly bleak, often graffitied exteriors. But the true transformation runs deeper than the artistry of the murals themselves; the real works of art are the changes these collaborative projects can inspire within communities. Those who work on and with murals, whether conceptualizing, painting, or organizing participants for their production, believe that the sociological possibilities for murals are endless. The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, California, states that mural art “has a significant transformative impact on most social problems of our time.”<sup>1</sup>

The mural arts movement rises in times of turmoil. This was indeed true in the sixties, when it became a form of street protest, particularly in African-American and Chicano neighborhoods. Mural art can save lives and renew hope. In the late seventies, civic-minded muralists began recruiting gang members and graffiti writers to beautify the very neighborhoods they had vandalized. Murals are painted on “urban canvas,” a medium that has tremendous power to challenge injustice, equalize disadvantage, and reduce acts of social disorder.<sup>2</sup> Mural arts programs and projects mobilize communities to articulate their dreams, express their frustrations, and, most importantly, consider strategies for change. Thus, mural arts programs are a worthy consideration for public policymakers.

This paper explores the ways that mural art establishes tangible communal bonds in urban centers that are rife with racial, social, and economic divides. It reveals the political and policy rationales behind municipal mural art programs that convey their efficacy in



transforming blight and in educating at-risk youth. This paper does not try to explain the techniques of the art form itself; rather, it looks at mural art from a political and public policy perspective. Mural art has been discussed in socioeconomic and political terms by several authors:

All art has a relationship to the social structures and political events of the society in which it is created that is found in both content and form. For most art, this relationship is fairly indirect. However, public art (and in particular mural art) is more directly tied to political and economic structures and social imperatives.<sup>3</sup>

Mural arts policy is indeed an innovative way to reconfigure the political and economic structures of urban neighborhoods, particularly those communities that need to define new social imperatives for themselves.

### *Methodology*

This paper provides a historical account of the mural movement in three major American cities: Los Angeles, Boston, and Philadelphia. In addition to using traditional research methods, evidence comes from the content and process of urban murals themselves. To borrow a phrase of one researcher: “The walls speak.”<sup>4</sup> The murals offer narratives about community events and experiences. The processes that occur before painting begins hold greater meaning still, and are recounted through primary and secondary sources. Original research was conducted through personal interviews, e-mail correspondence, and on-site visits to Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and New York.

Unlike many other cities, there is a decided lack of comprehensive research material about Boston’s murals. California has always been considered a leader in mural painting and conservation; several books have been published about murals in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Why the absence of information about Boston’s mural history? This research is motivated by the same sense of obligation expressed by a California muralist when she described her own struggle to unlock the historical vault twenty-five years ago:

We felt obligated to write in order to break through the near blackout of critical attention. Aside from extensive spot or human-interest coverage in local papers, the entire literature on contemporary murals consists of some dozen magazine articles, a few pamphlets, chapters in a few books, and a methods manual. . . . Despite the artistic richness and social significance of the mural movement, only a handful of established art critics have given the community murals attention . . . . The literature on public art in general is scanty, reflecting the privatistic focus of the art market; the nature of public art is little understood, outside the mural neighborhoods. Few critics



are prepared to deal with the aesthetic, art-historical, or social issues involved in discussing public art forms.<sup>5</sup>

The literature on urban mural arts projects, particularly devoted to East Coast cities, is not much better than it was twenty-five years ago; so this case study stands not as an end product but as a necessary beginning.

### ***Key Issues and Clarification of Terms***

Mural art evolves from a form of impromptu public protest to a strategy used by cities for community and economic development. The following issues are addressed:

- How mural art programs can build self-esteem and social and intellectual capital among youths who, without the creative skills and interaction that these projects require, might never transcend the disadvantage of their socioeconomic status.
- How mural paintings can enhance the perception and quality of urban neighborhoods, while promoting economic development.
- How Boston's history can inform other cities such as Los Angeles and Philadelphia that are searching for innovative, community-based frameworks to integrate arts into urban revitalization efforts.

Mural art is here defined as public, outdoor wall paintings. The process is a collaborative civic experience, whether executed by commissioned professional artists or youth programs. Both community-based mural projects and urban environmental works are discussed. Community-based productions are just as they imply: painted in consultation and often with the "manpower" of neighborhood residents. In contrast, murals painted for urban environmental purposes usually do not contain social or political messages: "Their style is frequently abstract or decorative. Their content purports to be non-ideological."<sup>6</sup> Community-based murals will be the primary focus of this case study, for they yield the ideological lessons needed to reconfigure community development policy.

Jonathan Lohman differentiated Philadelphia's murals from other public art:

A mural, unlike, for example, a steel sculpture, must be painted on site, not constructed in an artist's studio and then "installed" in a specific location. The key difference regarding mural production is often ignored in critical writings on public art which instead tend to lump various categories of public art forms together. Stated most directly — *you can't have a mural without a wall.*<sup>7</sup>

Scholars have called urban murals “new genre public art.” Graffiti “art” is not the subject of my research. Lohman offers perhaps the best explanation of how murals differ from graffiti: “Unlike the graffiti that is usually applied to the landscape while most residents sleep, mural making is done openly and publicly, and interaction between artists and audience is common.”<sup>8</sup> The terms “mural” and “graffiti” are often interchanged. To amalgamate the two is erroneous, yet understandable, given that several municipal programs were begun with the express intent of eradicating graffiti:

Graffiti and blight became inextricably entwined in the minds of many of the city’s residents [Philadelphia]. Thus, somehow erasing graffiti or ‘replacing’ it with ‘art,’ was increasingly seen by city officials as a way to improve public perception of the economic and social state of the city. Also, fiscally speaking, as daunting a task as eliminating graffiti may be, it seemed far more affordable than attempting to overhaul those conditions that were often viewed as inspiring its creation.”<sup>9</sup>

Discussion of graffiti will be limited to how it propelled the creation of specific mural arts programs.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS:**

### **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT POLICY FROM WORKS OF ART**

What we need when we talk about society is not a sense of the worlds we have lost. We need to live in the world we have as best we can. So long as that is the case, civil society will always be around us — and can always be improved.

— Alan Wolfe, “Is Civil Society Obsolete.”

#### ***Defining Community***

Over the last decade, there has been much debate over how to restore a sense of community and civility in a society rife with violent crime, economic stratification, and racial tension. At the heart of this discussion is the concept of “community”; what it meant in the past, how it can reinvent itself in the present, what it should or should not become in the future. Sociologists, keenly aware of the difficulty of the challenge, struggle to reconcile strategies for building community and social capital among the most marginalized of society.

The very word community has found a place, however fuzzy and imprecise, all over the ideological spectrum. On the far left it is a code word for a more egalitarian society in which the oppressed of all colors are included and made beneficiaries of a more generous welfare system that commits far more than the current one does to education, social services, and the eradication of poverty. On the far right it signifies an emphasis on individual self-discipline that would replace the welfare state with a private rebirth of personal responsibility. In the middle it seems to reflect a much simpler yearning for a network of comfortable, reliable relationships.<sup>10</sup>

If a consistent understanding of the word “community” is this evasive and controversial, one can imagine the difficulty in devising and implementing practical strategies for rebuilding urban neighborhoods challenged by crime, racism, and limited opportunity. The paradoxical tension between the need for community and the marginalization of the disadvantaged is most visible in our urban centers. It is this tension that leads scholars, politicians, neighbors, and artists to search for ways to restore community, without stifling the freedom and individualism that have become priorities of modern times. Social theorists note the absolute necessity for digging beyond rhetoric and nostalgia for community in modern day society. They embark upon a sociological excavation, uncovering the many challenges of rebuilding modern community. Some theorists understand that times have changed and theoretical



frameworks must follow. They elaborate on the effect a sense of community can have on an urban center:

Community development can, however, help prevent neighborhood deterioration in ordinary times. It can blunt the extent to which economic turbulence produces social disorder. Community development can make low-to-moderate income neighborhoods better places to live by reducing health and safety risks, connecting residents to opportunity, helping to stabilize housing and commercial investment, and holding accountable the people and institutions responsible for public services and the nurturance of children. Indeed, a strong system for strengthening neighborhoods, including heavy emphasis on reducing isolation from outside opportunities, might do more over a generation to mitigate social and economic disadvantage than now seems plausible.<sup>11</sup>

Sociologist Robert Sampson examines why community must be developed, *not rekindled*, in these times: “Community has been lost and rediscovered many times, it turns out, so one must be careful not to unwittingly reinvent old solutions or wax nostalgic for a mythical past.”<sup>12</sup> In effect, it would be unproductive to approach community building as a way to bring back the days of yesteryear or to model community based on the collegiality of the past.

### ***Social Capital***

While cautioning against reinventing non-applicable strategies, Sampson is candid and realistic about the absence of research on and policy frameworks for restoring community, and in particular, for reinvestment in social capital: “Few research efforts have directly assessed the transmission processes through which neighborhood effects operate. Community social capital, in particular, is a construct that is much talked about but little studied in rigorous manner.”<sup>13</sup> He continues: “Whether survey, observational, or ethnographic, research designs are needed that allow the study of both neighborhood and individual change as a means to distinguish contextual from individual-level effects.”<sup>14</sup>

Mural art, although centuries old, offers itself for modern study precisely because of its efficacy in promoting neighborhood and individual change. By improving the physical as well as the social and psychological aspects of communities, mural art programs attempt to reach children who otherwise might be untouchable — those who, if left “un-reached,” would be unmarketable in this knowledge-based society. The programs often do so while engaging entire communities. Those unaware of the contemporary mural movement and its

penchant for political and social organizing might question how mere “art projects” can accomplish serious sociological objectives. To begin with, mural art projects often require rigorous organization and research. They teach artistic skills to children whose education usually does not include techniques in painting and drawing on such a large scale. Since mural art is public art, it exposes youth to a constant pedestrianism: the community passers-by who question, critique, and/or compliment the artwork itself. In cases where the mural imagery sparks political controversy, youths learn to navigate the complexities of diplomacy and compromise. Mural art programs create unique job opportunities, alternatives to the typical minimum wage opportunities available to teenagers, such as working at a local fast food chain. Heidi Schork, Director of The Boston Mural Crew (BMC), concurs:

Now I’ve been arguing for eleven years there should be more kids doing art. Why are they weed-whacking a vacant lot and not planting gardens? I think there’s a tremendous amount of creative energy that’s being lost because so many kids idle who need money, who need the experience [in the arts], who need exposure to get out of their neighborhoods and see what else is going on in the city.”<sup>15</sup>

Ferguson and Dickens, in describing the assets needed for community development, set up a theoretical structure that mural art programs can follow:

Assets in community development, as in any other context, take five basic forms: physical capital in the form of buildings, tools, and so forth; intellectual and human capital in the form of skills, knowledge, and confidence; social capital — norms, shared understandings, trust, and other factors that make relationships feasible and productive; financial capital (in standard forms); and political capital, which provides the capacity to exert political influence. An entity’s political capital comprises those aspects of its physical, financial, social, and intellectual capital that have potential to affect political outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

Although sociologists and researchers have not specified mural art as a means of improving the socioeconomic status and increasing political capital of individual youths and specific communities, muralists and scholars who have documented mural movements and programs are aware of their potential. Mural art historian Alan Barnett writes:

The significance of the murals lies first of all in what they have done for the people of their neighborhoods, union locals, schools, and social service centers where they have been painted. But their importance lies also in the far-reaching example they and their communities have set for the rest of us. The murals are in fact mirrors that show us what we are, what we could be, and how. They have indicated the racism, sexism, economic exploitation of society and helped bring people together to overcome them. Furthermore, the murals have begun to reconnect art, ordinary work, and community.<sup>17</sup>

Where Barnett highlights the benefits of the mural process to communities and the young participants, sociological research by Ferguson and Stoutland offers another paradigm for successful community development programs:

To achieve sustainable momentum toward the ideals of community development, the field needs alliances of many types, including many that span several levels and sectors and some to do political battle against opposing interests. We argue that four questions of trust (regarding motives, competence, dependability, and collegiality) together with capacity, self-interest, and power will determine which alliances form and succeed. With regard to all types of alliances, three promising routes to a more effective community development system are to help individuals and organizations become more competent, dependable, and collegial as current or potential allies; to find and evaluate allies; and to manage divisive tensions that form inside alliances.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Building Alliances***

In order to form necessary community and governmental alliances, mural art initiatives, from their conception through their development, must operate with the motives of trust, competence, dependability, and collegiality. In this way, participants develop self-interest, power, and a capacity for social capital. The levels and sectors that such alliances for community development must navigate, according to Ferguson and Stoutland, include the following:

Level zero (as in ground level or grassroots) comprises residents as individuals and households, their networks of informal social ties in housing developments and neighborhoods, employment settings, clubs, churches, and schools. . . . Level one comprises *frontline* organizations—nonprofit, for profit, and public sector—that use paid staff to serve or represent residents. . . . Level two includes local policymakers, funders, and providers of technical assistance who together make up the authorizing and support environment for level one. Level three is the state, regional, and national counterpart to level two, and its function is to support levels two and one.<sup>19</sup>

Community mural projects and programs often function across all four of these levels. City-administered mural programs for youth often rely on simultaneous alliances, which function at all or most of these levels.

Ferguson and Stoutland's model, for example, can be applied to the Boston Mural Crew (BMC). Level zero (the grassroots) begins with the Boston residents, businesses, and homeowners who volunteer the wall space that becomes the mural site. Community members are also part of level zero: witnessing and/or questioning the content and themes of the artwork, residents become active participants in its design, modification, and later, its



protection. Lastly, in order to be hired by the BMC, participants must be Boston residents. The BMC also includes the frontline public sector and nonprofit organizations that, according to Ferguson and Stoutland, comprise level one. Boston not only pays all the youth muralists for their summer work, but it provides funds for the tools of the craft, including the paint, studio space, scaffolding, brushes and the like. This “technical assistance,” provided to the BMC by the Parks and Recreation Department, forges an alliance at level two. Lastly, level three is comprised of state, regional, and national agencies. The BMC does not yet receive funding from the state or corporate donors. But commissioned murals have been funded with regional grant money from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and other entities, indicating that this level of alliance has been achieved by other mural projects.

Viable mural programs across the country generally function within this multi-level, multi-constituency theoretical framework, some do it unconsciously, some use formal policies. To effectively enhance community relations, mural programs must channel the energies of neighborhood youth into constructive projects. According to Sampson, “A major dimension of social organization is the ability of a community to supervise and control teenage peer groups. Unruly behavior by youth is a sign that the neighborhood is losing ground to a peer-controlled system [and that there is a need for] positive intergenerational connections between youth and adults in the community” in order to renew and strengthen communities.<sup>20</sup> Mural art has been bridging generations of residents for years, in passive and aggressive, as well as peacefully and radically political ways. When asked about the significance of mural programs, Jane Golden, Director of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, often repeats what has become her mantra: “Art saves lives.” She states, “I’ve seen art — always a lifeline for me — become a lifeline for young people and communities.”<sup>21</sup> Many of Philadelphia’s projects employ youth; nearly all of them are initiated by specific community members. (This will be discussed further in the Philadelphia section of this paper.)

These projects, even the most effective, often go unheralded by the political machines that fund them. A recent article in the *Boston Globe* covered the city’s effort to combat graffiti and engage artists productively, without ever mentioning the city’s mural program.<sup>22</sup> It is surprising that this creative concept for community development has not become more widespread in the urban design plans for struggling cities.



## THE EARLY HISTORY OF MURALISM: POLITICS AND ACTIVISM

### *The Works Progress Administration: Commissioned Works for Public Enrichment*

American mural painting began to flourish during the Great Depression, under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the 1930s, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), funded murals as a means of "creating a permanent record of the aspirations and achievements of American people."<sup>23</sup> The federal government commissioned needy artists to paint murals, mostly on interior walls in post offices, schools, and government buildings across the country. As historian Karal Ann Marling notes, public art at that time "involved three constituencies: the painter, the commissioning agency, and the people."<sup>24</sup> Marling goes on to describe how the PWAP was administered:

To achieve nationwide relief coverage quickly, the PWAP relied upon a jerry-rigged administrative structure: the map was divided into sixteen regions, each headed by a local art authority, most often a museum director who knew area artists and had an institutional base of operations from which to conduct project business. Regional chairpersons in turn assembled advisory committees of prominent citizens and officials whose main function was to find tax-supported facilities amenable to receiving PWAP artwork.<sup>25</sup>

Whether public works of art are made possible by government funding or through private commission they often become susceptible to censorship. For a classic WPA-era example: on May 9, 1933, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., ordered the censorship of Diego Rivera's mural in the Rockefeller Center because it featured a portrait of Lenin. Marling writes that Nelson Rockefeller reminded the painter that the "piece is beautifully painted, but it seems to me that the portrait appearing in this mural might seriously offend a great many people. If it were in a private house, it would be one thing, but this mural is in a public building and the situation, therefore, is quite different."<sup>26</sup> This public-private tension still affects mural projects today, especially street art projects. The mural that some residents consider an improvement to their neighborhood may be reviled by others as a denigration.

The WPA era parallels the contemporary movement of the 1960s in that it made a concerted effort to put art and the "art world" within reach of the general public. The country



did not yet have a “sustained tradition of public patronage of the fine arts.”<sup>27</sup> According to Marling, “The public perceived the painter as social alien.” She writes:

Whether the overt aim of a given New Deal agency was to supply necessary economic relief for artists or to commission works of art for a public audience under economic circumstances that induced artists to accept public employment, federal patronage provided the forum wherein painterly alienation and the concept of the avant-garde would be intensely scrutinized by painters, art experts, and a new artistic audience of ordinary people.<sup>28</sup>

Crafting mural art programs as public policy might seem avant-garde, perhaps alien, to those unaware of their efficacy. Now more than ever, governmentally administered mural art programs are multi-purpose. Murals bring art to ordinary people and are an accessible part of the daily environment. Jonathan Lohman writes of The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (MAP): “MAP murals are generally viewed by neighborhood residents not as a threat to their own ‘aesthetics,’ or a substitution to murals painted in the ‘graffiti style,’ but a welcomed addition to them.”<sup>29</sup> Just as in the WPA era, today’s mural art projects offer patronage to artists (both young amateurs and professionals) who, because of economic status or political ideology, are left on the fringes of society. The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (MAP), for example “was designed to train kids on probation in public art techniques, and to replace graffiti tagged walls with murals.” Its director and founder, Jane Golden, states: “Graffiti is symptomatic of severe problems . . . . A lot of these kids are on drugs, have dropped out of school and often are trapped.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, mural arts programs are a “way out” for youth who have become “trapped.”

Some seventy years after the WPA era, mural art has been incorporated into municipal agendas, serving both public art and social purposes. According to Lohman’s research, of the then-2000 murals painted in Philadelphia, there were “less than six reported cases of any of the MAP murals being tagged” [or defaced with graffiti].<sup>31</sup> In this way, today’s municipal murals seem to counter social alienation, particularly among urban youth. The act of graffiti, long considered a sign of social disorder, has been curbed by mural creation. This is a radical evolution indeed.

### ***Black Power, Black Pride: Painted on a Wall, Infused into a Community***

“This wall was created to beautify our community.” “Beautify” implied more than the physical attractiveness the mural would bring to the community. It meant that the wall was painted to raise the awareness in local people of their “soul,” “creativity,

and power, a consciousness that was expressed by the then-new affirmation ‘Black is beautiful.’”

— Alan Barnett, *Community Murals: The People’s Art*

Community-based public art, also referred to as street art, became a familiar sight in American cities in the 1960s. An increase in murals coincided with the political activism of the decade: black pride and civil rights, the women’s movement, and the farm workers’ revolution. In 1964, Malcolm X called upon African Americans to begin a cultural revolution: “Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle,” he professed.<sup>32</sup> The association between Black Pride and muralism is important not only because it was the historical beginning of post-WPA mural art, but because through this cultural movement mural art had the potential to enhance community and strengthen individuals’ self-determination:

The artists of the Civil Rights Movement used their works to arouse social and historical consciousness. At the same time, they were part of an important aesthetic and cultural movement for Afro-Americans. The murals were grand, dramatic, narrative, and often heroic; and many times, they self-consciously sought to express the concerns and dreams of their people.<sup>33</sup>

African-American artist William Walker was one of the first painters to depict black culture in large-scale color, and in public, at a racially dangerous time. He painted a portion of the original 1967 *Wall of Respect* in Chicago. Largely regarded as the first community-based mural, this wall was a collaborative effort of about sixteen African-American artists.

Walker conveyed the need for this mural in 1960s urban America:

It was in Memphis that I first became aware of the fact that Black people had no appreciation for art or artists—they were too busy just struggling to survive. I then decided that a Black artist must dedicate his work to his people. At the same time, he must retain his relevance and integrity as an artist. In questioning myself as to how I could best give my art to Black people, I came to the realization that art must belong to ALL people. That is when I first began to think of public art.<sup>34</sup>

Walker’s comments not only explain the relevance of art for the African-American community, they undeniably relay the need for black culture to find a public voice and forum in a world dominated by whites. Mural art, for many African Americans, became a means of mass and mainstream communication. It established a dialogue about race and racism.



Internationally, particularly in Mexico and Ireland, mural art had been used in this manner for centuries; therefore, the idea of protest art came late — albeit no less dramatically — to the United States.



William Walker, et al., *The Wall of Respect*, Chicago, 1967

This art was a radical statement by many African-American artists, and much of its content was a direct challenge to the political establishment in urban centers. Artist Dana Chandler, one of the founding African-American muralists, who painted some of Boston's most controversial murals, characterized the mural art movement's relation to Black Pride as follows:

The mural movement is long-term and it rises up in times of turmoil. When things generally get bad, that's when people will try to find a place to make statements about how bad things are. In that sense, the needs of people were paramount in the sixties and seventies, so a mural movement occurred: How are we going to get to say, as artists, what we want to say? Well, we're going to paint it on a wall because they're not going to let us put it in a museum. And so that's exactly what occurred: 'We're sick of your s\_\_\_; we're going to let you know how sick of your s\_\_\_ we really are, and we're going to put how sick of your s\_\_\_ we are on the walls.' And that's what we did . . . The Harlem Renaissance was: 'We are wonderful people and



why don't you love us?' The movement in the 60's was: 'F\_\_\_ you, we don't give a s\_\_\_ what you think.' We're going to paint what we want to paint, when we want to paint, where we want to paint it, and that's exactly what we did.<sup>35</sup>

According to Reginald Butler, a research historian at the African-American Historical & Cultural Museum, the murals were a significant part of the "urban-centered social protest," sweeping cities. He writes:

It is not coincidental that this revolutionary approach to social protest would include socially conscious artists who insisted on the direct relevance of art to political issues and vice-versa. Exterior murals were an extension of artists' concern with the issues directly affecting their communities. Murals were catalysts for, as well as products of, community action. Art for these artists, as in the tradition of Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera, was primarily functional. Aesthetic considerations were important but they were often subordinate to broader political and economic goals.<sup>36</sup>

This form of social protest was an alternative to the peaceful philosophy embraced by the Southern Christian Leaders Conference (SCLC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>37</sup> Early black murals echoed the propaganda of the Black Power and Black Panther movements, often using strong imagery. African-inspired colors and patterns and militaristic symbols like guns and grenades were prominent in these murals. Beyond the actual imagery, the most important element in the creation of these murals was "the focus on community-centered and community-directed programs for change."<sup>38</sup> The Chicago *Wall of Respect* project was organized amid extreme racial tension. "Urban murals were never solely passive reflections of the world that muralists saw around them. They offered commentaries and critiques of abhorrent sociopolitical structures."<sup>39</sup> The first murals, which included portraits of Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, Stokely Carmichael, and other historical leaders, were seen as affirmations of pride, bravery, and solidarity. They "brought communities face-to-face with public representations of their heroes, gave lessons in African-American history, and encouraged them [communities] to resist the forces of oppression."<sup>40</sup>

These early social protest murals were effective in raising the political consciousness of both African Americans and the white establishment. City administrators began to sponsor mural projects, although many artists, including Chandler, argue that they did so to appease and contain the African-American community. Even if direct change did not occur, it was clear that public officials and the art world were beginning to take notice of how

powerful these murals were for community residents. The work of African-American artists gained recognition, and their sociopolitical demands were finally given a public forum. Directly inspired by the *Wall of Respect* in Chicago, Boston artists Dana Chandler and Gary Rickson painted *Stokely and Rap: Freedom and Self-Defense* in 1968. Chandler predicted the work would spotlight African-American culture in America's consciousness: "There is no Black art in the Museum of Fine Arts [in Boston], so we are going to utilize the facades of buildings in our community for our museum. . . . Black art is not decoration. It is a revolutionary force."<sup>41</sup> In a recent interview, Chandler echoed this sentiment. More than three decades later, his words convey the power of these murals:

Gary Rickson and I painted the murals that were the most threatening to the European psyche, and there was no one else that painted murals that were threatening to the European psyche [in Boston]. As for whether it was revolutionary for Africans in America to be painting images of themselves: Absolutely. As I said back then, one of the reasons we were painting the murals we were painting, was because we could not find our presence in the museums of this country. . . . You have to remember this is at a time that there were no African-American museums. Right after we did those, African-American museums began to appear.<sup>42</sup>

The term "Wall of Respect" became a catch phrase for African-American murals. Similarly themed walls were painted in other cities including St. Louis and Philadelphia. Detroit had its own *Wall of Dignity*. In 1969, another mural was painted across from the original *Wall of Respect* entitled *The Wall of Truth*. Its inscription read: "We, the People of this community, claim this building in order to preserve what is ours."<sup>43</sup> Like the *Wall of Respect*, this wall "proclaimed that black people have the right to define black culture and black history for themselves, to name their own heroes."<sup>44</sup> Chicago's wall, however, received the most attention. Its capacity to empower community members seemed more extensive, or perhaps this wall was more exploited by the media than walls in other cities.<sup>45</sup> Barnett touted it as groundbreaking:

It was an instrument for the survival of people and their community and it was done under the threat of defacement and violence, but local gangs and a congressman lent their support. The art and activism that went into it did not come to an end when the painting was completed. The *Wall of Respect* became a focus of the community, with a number of those pictured on it coming to speak at the site to gatherings about the urgent problems of Black people and to perform music.<sup>46</sup>

The African-American community also used murals as a way to stake claim over a neighborhood. The Chicago murals were vigorously defended. Efforts to demolish them for

urban renewal projects repeatedly failed. Fire ultimately destroyed the building on 43rd and Langley, where the original Wall of Respect mural had been painted.

During this period of cultural revolution, in 1969, a white Chicago artist named John Weber started what Barnett calls the first collaboration of untrained community youth residents and a professional artist. “His ability to work in the ghetto and what he could bring to it was another breakthrough in cooperation.”<sup>47</sup> The mural was a thirty-seven-foot-long production, created by Weber and young African-American youths over the summer. It also followed the *Wall of Respect* tradition of memorializing black leaders. This innovation in both technique and mixed racial co-creation signaled a more cooperative direction for the mural movement in the seventies.

In the next decade, mural artists began to express sociopolitical messages about the need for better healthcare, education, and a stronger family life; against gang crime, drugs and prostitution; and denouncing the neglect of the elderly.<sup>48</sup> Additional minority groups began painting murals. The Chicano revolution was occurring on the West Coast, which also had an impact in the Midwest and Northeast. Between the years 1967 and 1977, it is estimated that over a thousand murals were painted in urban centers throughout America. The mural arts movement, often regarded as having been sparked by African-American artists, also was fed by the fervor of Chicanos, and then by Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and white Americans.<sup>49</sup> Countless communities in struggle, needing political outlets, were using murals as their medium to debate, enjoin, and teach. Painting murals became a way communities could document history, express cultural identities, and inspire political and social activism.

### ***The Chicano Movement***

Since it is unclear which political group sparked the contemporary mural movement, it would be unfair to discuss the Black Power movement without some mention of the farm workers’ revolution in California, which began in 1962, with César Chávez. By 1965, Chávez’s laborers — farmers of Filipino, Mexican, and Chicano-Mexican descent — formed the largest agricultural movement in U.S. history.<sup>50</sup> Much like the Black Power movement that was occurring simultaneously, the Chicano movement was cultural and political in nature, as characterized at the time by artist/organizer Luis Valdeza:



What about culture? It's akin to a political act. It is when a man stands up and takes his life in his hands and says, I am going to change my life. That's what culture is all about. I feel that before you get any political act out of a man, that man has to feel a certain pride in himself. He has to touch his own dignity, his own destiny. La Raza ["the Race"] need the arts to tell itself where it is. The arts are largely prophetic.<sup>51</sup>

The first documented Chicano murals were painted in 1968 in the cities of Del Ray and Sacramento, California, precisely at the same time many Black Power murals were painted. The similarity of the two movements' use of mural art is undeniable. Barnett draws the parallel: "The Del Ray mural thus suggests that this new art form in which community people actively participated grew out of the crucial experience of public demonstrations by which they transformed themselves from victims and spectators to creators."<sup>52</sup>

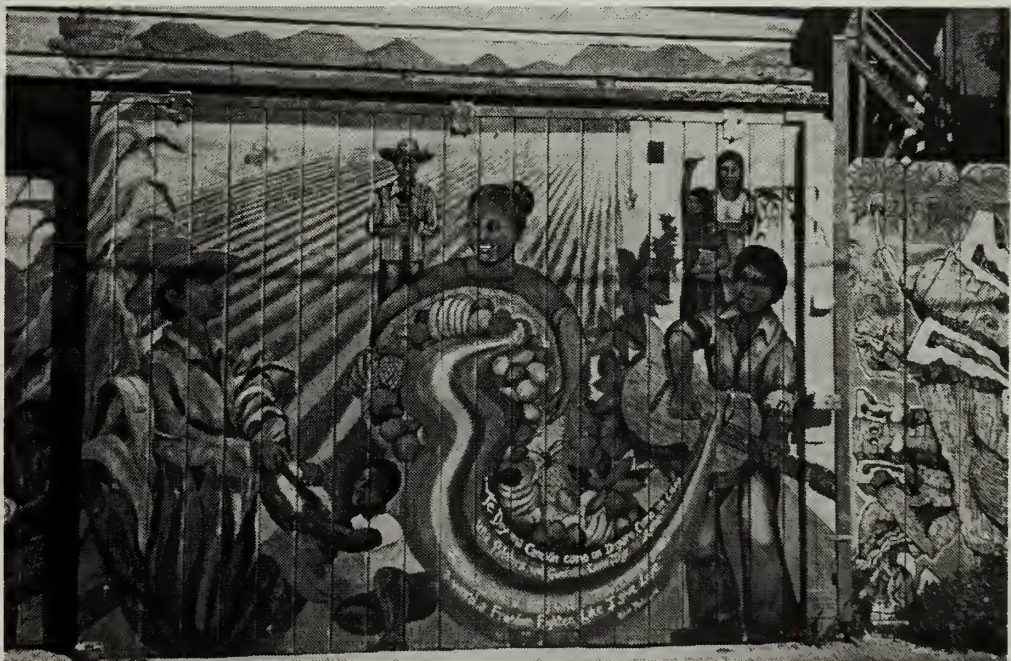
Artists were organizing in California as well. The Rebel Chicano Art Front (RCA), was formed by Jose Montoya, Esteban Villa, Ricardo Fauela, and Juanishi Orosco. The group later became known as the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) and painted collaborative murals from 1968 through 1979.<sup>53</sup> The early Chicano murals were largely inspired by the Mexican artists known as Los Tres Grandes ("The Three Greats"): Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco.<sup>54</sup> The politically leftist style of Los Tres Grandes began popping up on walls in urban barrios in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and in the mid-western cities of Chicago and Denver. Although the techniques and imagery of the paintings often emulated the famous Mexican artists, the philosophy of the process was quite different. Like the founding African-American artists, Chicano painters wanted to establish a permanent place to market their art because they had no presence in museums.<sup>55</sup> As in Boston, for Chandler and Rickson — in California, for the RCA — the street became a museum of protest and productivity for artists, the public, and youths. Murals flourished where social disorder and frustration had reigned:

Chicano murals sprung up wherever there had been a wall displaying "graffiti." Murals were painted not to censor the "graffiti," but because the walls also represented the important locations of effective public communication for a particular segment of youths in barrios. While the Mexican murals were funded, sanctioned and promoted on government buildings (usually painted in the interiors) by a post-1910 Mexican Revolution administration, Chicano murals appeared virtually overnight on the sides of zapaterias (shoes stores), panaderias (bakeries), carniceras (meat markets), centros (community-based art centers), and other store fronts, fences, and alleys.<sup>5</sup>



Barnett theorized that muralists “helped people think through strategies for change.”<sup>57</sup> Murals were a way to give voice to those who most desperately needed to be heard. They offered a silent, yet influential, rallying call. “The first three years of the new murals, 1967 through 1969, and 1970, exhibited isolated but determined efforts of artists and the untrained to use public walls to assert their grievances against an establishment that deprived them of what was essential to their survival and self-respect.”<sup>58</sup> The murals presented a new option to oppressed people: the choice to rise and fight for rights, for space, and for stature in urban America.

Modern artists are using the same energy that fueled the protest murals of the 1960s to mobilize urban communities today, on as many non-traditional public canvases as possible. The mural below was painted in 1984, then restored in 1998, by the Precita Eyes Mural Center in San Francisco. Its title, *Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance that Blossoms into the Flower of Liberation*, encompasses the mural’s theme of freedom. It was painted in Balmy Alley, in the city’s Mission District.



Miranda Bergman & O'Brian Thiele, *Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance that Blossoms into the Flower of Liberation* (detail) © 1984

The overall effect of the image is upbeat even while the mural evokes the cultural history of the farm workers’ revolution. Now the younger residents who live near Balmy Alley, and the

tourists who visit Precita Eyes, are exposed to history they might not have known. The lessons of the Chicano mural movement, and the spirit of the mural arts, endure.

## **EAST COAST VERSUS WEST: PAINT, SPACE, AND THE TITLE OF MOST “MURALED” CITY**

At the heart of neighborhood rejuvenation, it's the rekindling of the spirit, of a neighborhood spirit and soul. . . . And how do you do that? I'm convinced it's through art and beauty.

— Jane Golden, Director of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program

Both Philadelphia and Los Angeles claim to be the “mural capital” of the United States. In both cities the administrators of mural arts programs have been careful to forge long-lasting relationships between artists, communities, and elected officials. This has resulted in an acceptance of mural art programs as one way to combat urban problems.

### ***Philadelphia: Channeling Graffiti into Higher Aesthetics and Purpose***

Like other urban centers, Philadelphia was profoundly affected by the grassroots activism of the late sixties. Its city streets were home to a form of public demonstration that was not as widespread in other urban centers: the underground graffiti “art” movement. Alan Barnett writes: “There are some locals who take pride in claiming that the contemporary wave of graffiti in the United States began there between 1967 and 1969 with the wall art of Cornbread, Cool Earl, and Hi Fi.”<sup>59</sup> City officials, however, did not take pride in this distinction, and began a campaign to eradicate its presence. It was this effort that ultimately harnessed the negative behaviors of graffitiists, and channeled them toward positive, productive, and authorized public creativity. The present-day result is the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, a municipally administered and partially government-funded community arts initiative.

In 1971, the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Department of Urban Outreach (DUO), hired two self-proclaimed environmental artists to respond to the city's battle against graffiti. In doing so, Philadelphia made its own contribution to the national mural movement that was then gaining momentum. Early on, the two artists, Clarence Wood and Don Kaiser, made a correlation between graffiti and gang membership. They began assembling teams of local inner city kids to make public art for their neighborhoods. Their mission began with a caveat: “Bring no preconceptions to a mural as to what it should be[,] apart from what local people ask for.”<sup>60</sup> In 1972, DUO sponsored a “Graffiti Alternatives Workshop,” which put former



graffitists (also referred to as “taggers”) to work decorating the city’s buses with their own paintings. The success of this workshop and the first murals, including Philadelphia’s own “Wall of Respect,” were a harbinger of the social awareness that murals could inspire.

In 1974, a group of youths who had worked on a different DUO project approached Wood and asked if he would help them paint a mural about a friend who had been killed by gang activity.<sup>61</sup> This effort marks one of the first uses of mural art as a way to memorialize the dead and to denounce gang violence. It demonstrated that murals could reach beyond the political heroes to include characters of ordinary life. Political art had been used across the country to memorialize historical leaders who had been assassinated. Now Philadelphia’s earliest muralists — professionals and their teen-aged collaborators — began using street art to commemorate the tragedy of ordinary death. In doing so, neighborhoods were able to chronicle ordinary life, even the most tragic aspects of it. Murals as memorials have flourished and were especially prominent in Philadelphia throughout the nineties. An exhibition entitled “Telling the Story: The Intersection of Art and Social History,” at Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia, attributed the rise in memorial murals to the increase in urban violence and drug use. Stated one artist:

By painting tragedy on the wall — protagonists are all young people who have died in any number of circumstances: perhaps caught in crossfire, dead from an overdose, killed in a car accident — family and friends can grieve publicly and with the support of the larger community. The image transcends the personal to speak of the precariousness of life and to warn future generations of the futility of violence.<sup>62</sup>

In 1979, the DUO changed its name to the Department of Community Programs (DCP). By then, it had organized approximately one hundred murals, while advising on more than three hundred throughout the city. The Philadelphia Museum provided all materials for the murals and the salaries of the founding artists. Many of the teenage painters were paid through the Neighborhood Youth Corps. From 1971 to 1976, funding for the projects was granted partly by the NEA. After 1976, the funding came entirely from the Museum Corporation, which had extensive fundraising capabilities at the time.<sup>63</sup>

In the early eighties, Jane Golden, a significant contributor to the West Coast mural arts scene, returned to her family on the East Coast, and spread her activism and artistry to Philadelphia, sparking an even greater evolution in the city’s mural art. As the co-founder and director of the Los Angeles Public Art Foundation, Golden had started a program there

that allowed juvenile offenders to paint city murals in exchange for community service credits. She eventually transplanted this concept to Philadelphia, after being hired by the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN), which was officially established in 1984 by Mayor Wilson Goode. Her affiliation with PAGN began with the title of “field representative,” which required her to reach out to graffiti artists and juvenile offenders, convincing them to work for the organization as a alternative to prosecution. Golden worked in this capacity for more than a decade and directed the mural component of PAGN. Eventually, the Mural Arts Program (MAP) was established in its own right, incorporated within the Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Department in 1996, and directed by Jane Golden. Its mission, then and now, is “bringing art and art education at no charge to communities.”<sup>64</sup> Since 1984, over 2000 murals have been painted in Philadelphia through the combined efforts of PAGN and MAP.

Much of Philadelphia’s current success may have to do with its media exposure, in large part due to Jane Golden’s role as ambassador to mural arts. A professor of fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania, she remains committed not only to MAP, but to the fundraising, outreach, and arts education that have spurred its growth.<sup>65</sup> Golden received the “Clara Barton Outstanding Humanitarian Award” from the American Red Cross in 1999. The program was spotlighted on national television on July 28, 2001, in an ABC “World News Tonight” segment produced by Peter Jennings. In it, Golden stated, “Murals often become a catalyst for positive social change. We do a mural and then people start thinking maybe we can turn this into a garden, we could sweep the streets.”<sup>66</sup> Last year MAP not only convinced Philadelphia’s government that it was a catalyst for social change, it inspired President Bush as well. The program received one of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities 2001 Coming Up Taller Awards.<sup>67</sup> It was honored for creating “more than 2,000 murals throughout Philadelphia and engag[ing] more than 12,000 young people in pursuit of its mission of providing Philadelphia’s youth and communities with hope through art.”<sup>68</sup> Boston’s branch of Artists for Humanity also received a 2001 Coming Up Taller Award for its work with youth through the arts. MAP’s mission statement reveals how its ability to instill hope also has a practical application for struggling urban centers:

Every year, the Mural Arts Program offers free art workshops to hundreds of Philadelphia youth. These workshops train young artists as mural painters and prepare youth to become independent, responsible adults and leaders in their

communities. Mural Arts uses arts education to provide job readiness skills, leadership training, and to show youth that they have the power to change their communities.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to its youth-based programming, MAP receives an average of fifty requests for murals per week from neighborhoods. The program generally creates eighty to ninety large-scale projects each year and uses an application process for all of its professional projects. Because of the program's popularity and its "commitment to making murals a meaningful part of youth and community development," it now requires that each project go through a "competitive selection process."<sup>70</sup> The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program continues to play an important role in the city's neighborhoods. Its application process is yet another way to democratize what has already been called the most democratic art form. Philadelphia is succeeding in bringing the mural arts into the future, without forgetting the idealism of its past.

### ***Los Angeles: The City of Angels Becomes a Haven for Street Art***

We repudiate so-called easel art and all such art which springs from ultraintellectual circles, for it is essentially aristocratic. We hail the monumental expression of art because such art is public property.

— David Alfaro Siqueiros, Mexican muralist

An author chronicling public art in Southern California wrote: "It is said that Los Angeles has more murals than any other city in the world—estimates have ranged from fifteen hundred to twenty-five hundred."<sup>71</sup> And Los Angeles has developed public policy governing the production, documentation, and conservation of mural art. The city's "Murals Policy," available from the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department, makes evident Los Angeles's commitment to the mural arts. According to this policy statement entitled "Mural Production: An Introductory Guide to Issues, Rights, and Responsibilities":

The Cultural Affairs Department seeks to nurture the creative process, protect freedom of expression and recognize the artistic cultural diversity that exists in our public spaces. It encourages city departments, artists, and property owners to work together to create new murals and to save and honor existing murals for the enjoyment of citizens and tourists for many years to come. As part of this policy, the Cultural Affairs Department takes a lead in documenting existing and new murals and promotes murals preservation and maintenance.<sup>72</sup>



Although mural painting in Los Angeles is municipally controlled and regulated, the city is “prohibited by statute from having anything to do with the content.”<sup>73</sup> Yet some artists believe that this policy is just a ruse — a way to control the political themes of the murals. David Fichter, a Cambridge-based muralist, painted *Lifeline: Creating a Healthy Community*, for the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Los Angeles. He commented about the city’s adoption of the mural art policy: “That’s what they did to stop Judy [the founder of SPARC], because she was putting up political murals and they didn’t like it.”<sup>74</sup> Los Angeles’s murals have always been political, and SPARC, which was founded in 1976, was built on political ideals. Its mission statement includes the following:

SPARC is a multi-ethnic arts center that produces, distributes, preserves and documents community based public art works. SPARC espouses public art as an organizing tool for addressing social issues, fostering cross-cultural understanding and promoting civic dialogue. Working within this philosophical framework, SPARC has created murals in almost every ethnic community in Los Angeles.<sup>75</sup>

Even before SPARC’s founding, Los Angeles was home to some of the most culturally and politically provocative public art in the nation. As in other cities, Los Angeles artists were paid by public agencies to paint murals as part of public works employment programs. (Boston’s Summerthing and New York’s City Arts programs were municipally sponsored mural art programs during the early seventies.) The Department of Recreation hired Judy Baca in 1970. She was paid with federal funds from the Emergency Employment Act to teach art to city children. Her first assignment was to convince twenty teenagers from battling barrios that painting murals was worthwhile public service. The former gang members were paid by the city’s Neighborhood Youth Corps program. Perhaps even then, Judy Baca was an activist artist waiting to ignite a revolution. Barnett characterized her mission: “Her own purpose was not the same as the city’s intention of ‘cool out.’ She understood very clearly that what many barrio murals were later to make explicit — that gang violence was a product of the racism of schools, discriminatory hiring, and police harassment that cut young Chicanos off from their natural development.”<sup>76</sup> Like Philadelphia, Los Angeles sought to engage some of its most neglected youth by paying them to create public art. Baca herself stated: “Generally art is thought of as a frivolous luxury. People have got to express themselves; that’s a necessity, not a luxury. Unless we begin to

tap into people's creativity, we'll have to continue to try to control their expression. And that kind of solution is not a good bet."<sup>77</sup>

The city and the muralist ambassadors galvanized young gang members to use the streets not for social warfare, but for telling their stories, calling for peace, and visualizing a way out of street life through the development of artistry and creativity. Another painter named Willie Herron used his connections to L.A. gangs to draw inspiration for the murals he began painting at age twenty-one. He invited gang members and graffitiists to "tag," or add to, a portion of his painting *The Plumed Serpent*. Herron realized that his mural could serve a greater social purpose if he collaborated with graffitiists. Through artistic expression, a level of trust developed between the muralist and the young graffitiists.<sup>78</sup>

In 1972, the gang-related deaths of four boys from a small neighborhood in East Los Angeles, known as Lil' Valley, motivated parents to propose a mural project to demystify the culture of violence that had engulfed their sons and their community. One of murals was painted on the wall of a market that lay between the gang "turfs." On it, the following inscription shows how poignant and powerful the process of painting this mural was to the community — a community trying to heal while attempting to save its young Chicano men: "In memory of our two brothers whose youthful lives were destroyed brutally. Out of the outrage committed against them has emerged a new era of love and brotherhood in our community — Their deaths were unwarranted but not in vain."<sup>79</sup> Baca's groups of young gang painters eventually became known as Las Vistas Nuevas ("New Vistas"). It was Baca's vision that would guide the mural movement in Los Angeles for the next three decades. And it is her leadership and idealism that still drives it today.

**BOSTON PROPER:  
PROTEST, PACIFICATION, AND A VIABLE CITY PROGRAM**

*Summerthing: Cooling Out a Long Hot Summer*

One of the most difficult and controversial problems we have encountered relates to ghetto demands for “self-determination” or “community control.” . . . The demand for a community voice represents a marked and desirable gain over the apathy that existed before. Despite its problems, we believe that meaningful community participation and a substantial measure of involvement in program development is an essential strategy for city government.

— *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder*, 1968

The National Commission on Civil Disorder in 1968 offered city leaders useful advice on how to counter the racial and sociopolitical fervor that was literally burning down cities across the nation. It might well have been part of the mission statement for Boston’s Summerthing Program, which was organized by the city and the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in 1968. The idea for Summerthing was originally conceived by Adele Seronde, who had dreamed of the “City as Museum.”<sup>80</sup> She stated: “One of the things we didn’t want to do was have artists doing it all. . . .The murals have been particularly valuable to the black community as a kind of forum. As propaganda they’re instructive, they make a sociological statement, but perhaps more importantly, they’re yards and yards of metaphor for people who really lack a channel.”<sup>81</sup> Undeniably, the creation of a metaphor was not the only objective of Summerthing. The program itself was a response to the times. It became a way that the city government would try to contain and “cool-out” the energy of the black community.<sup>82</sup> Regardless, it coincided with the desire of black artists to paint, at least for the first two years of the program.

Dana Chandler and Gary Rickson were invited to paint murals for Summerthing by its director, Kathy Kane, who worked in the Office of Cultural Affairs under Mayor Kevin H. White. It has been documented that the artists set their own terms and expressly stated that they would not be told what to paint. The city agreed. When Chandler recently reflected on this time, he stated:

I think the person who headed it, Kathy Kane, her intentions were nurturing. The Mayor’s intentions were to keep the city quiet and not have the kind of riots they were having all over the country. We, those of us who were African Americans,



were pretty clear that this was a method to keep the city quiet, that it was a stop-gap measure. [It] eventually led to some substantive things in terms of working inside of communities, and certainly allowed the city government to understand that they had to begin to work inside the communities, and they could not ignore the communities.<sup>83</sup>

Referred to by some as a “pact of mutual convenience,” Summerthing led to the creation of militant black murals in the South End and Roxbury neighborhoods of Boston in 1968 and 1969. In the first two years of the program, half of the murals (approximately thirty-five) were painted in black neighborhoods, even though at this time the city’s population was only 15 to 20 percent African-American. Chandler observed: “They were so frightened that we were going to explode as a population all across the great city of Boston and go downtown and burn down the Prudential.”<sup>84</sup>

At its peak in 1970, Summerthing had an operating budget of \$425,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and city funds. A quarter of its budget came from private donors, most likely through art-minded contacts of Seronde, who was from a prominent Boston family. Monies were channeled through the Boston Foundation, and not only murals, but other community related projects including installation of playgrounds and festivals, were funded. In all, the Boston Foundation funded 1500 events and projects.<sup>85</sup> The number of socially conscious murals began to drop off as other projects increased and as Summerthing’s mural policies also began to change.

In 1971, Summerthing began paying modest artist’s fees, which some saw as a baiting by commission. It began introducing competitions, which pitted artists against each other for work and was viewed as another measure of control. Summerthing’s murals had been overseen by the ICA until 1972. When Barbara Morris was hired as the Director of Cultural Affairs, she assumed control of the mural program. The following statement signaled her new vision of what constituted acceptable content for city-funded art: “There is a basic need to improve the environment. . . . Public art . . . shows recognition towards artists and hopefully creates more commissions for them while improving the appearance of the city.”<sup>86</sup> This directive led to a transition from community-based, socially conscious murals to more abstract, urban environmental paintings. Even Chandler’s *Knowledge is Power: Stay in School*, which contained positive social content, may not have matched the city’s desire to provide images that “improved the appearance of the city.” Despite its simple, logical

message, the mural contained a radically militant core. Featured in the center of the mural is a white egg from which black and white leaders, educators, laborers, and athletes are emerging. At the center of the egg is a white figure, holding a rifle, wearing strands of bullets.



Dana Chandler, *Knowledge is Power: Stay in School* (detail), 1972

Chandler admitted that his work for Summerthing influenced policy changes: “They took all of the murals, because of what we painted and decided that it was not what they wanted to see in public walls.”<sup>87</sup> Barnett writes:

What distinguished the coordinating of mural activity in Boston from the muralist groups and workshops of other cities was that it was operated by administrators, young, interested, and liberal within the political establishment rather than by muralists who took time away from painting to handle their common affairs. One of the results was that when the early Black Power murals of Chandler and Rickson, which Summerthing sponsored, generated public controversy, its administrative staff shied away from such projects in the future.<sup>88</sup>

In essence, the lack of artist organization made the community-based murals vulnerable to being co-opted and controlled by municipalities.

Murals also began to be painted outside of the “ghetto” and, increasingly, new artists were sought. Summerthing expanded projects into Chinatown, Back Bay, East Boston, Mattapan, and the North End. Of the original artists, only two received funding after 1970, and eighteen new artists were chosen for projects. By 1973, only three of those painters went on to do city-sponsored works. While cities in the northeast, such as New York and Philadelphia, began to emulate Summerthing, Boston’s commitment to its mural program began to wane.

With the mural movement achieving new peaks and advances in 1972, particularly in Boston, the NEA established a special Inner City Mural Program. . . . As is the case of Summerthing, NEA spread its mural monies to sponsor more environmentally oriented programs aimed at white suburban artists and at meeting businessmen’s desires for beautifying and renovating downtown commercial areas.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, the funding of mural projects by government agencies is a double-edged sword for artists and communities:

The pattern of NEA support duplicates that observed with Summerthing in the Boston movement. It would seem that the control of funding and distribution of grants for murals by a central “outside,” or city agency, although one solution to the problem of financial backing and coordination, tends toward a dilution of socially conscious statements and a spreading of funds in the name of fairness, which has the net effect of gradually withdrawing funds from those oppressed communities where murals were initially generated through felt need and where they served a genuine social function.<sup>90</sup>

By 1973, Summerthing had disbanded. Individual artists continued to work, but they never formed an organization. In 1974, a symposium was held specifically to revive the mural movement. At that time, Chandler and Seronde discussed the need to form an artists’ coalition, but it did not occur.<sup>91</sup> At the first publication of *Toward a People’s Art* (1977), the authors wrote that the strongest artists were still receiving commissions to do public murals.<sup>92</sup> Chandler went on to a teaching career in the arts at Northeastern University and Simmons College. In the late 1970s, he founded Northeastern University’s African-American Master Artists-in-Residency Program (AAMARP). Though he no longer directs the collaborative, it still thrives in Jamaica Plain. The lack of artists’ organization is one reason why Boston’s program did not last:

What happened to the movement in Boston points out some of the dangers inherent in city-sponsored community mural movements, however good the intentions of city sponsors. Initially, under Seronde’s strong leadership and under pressure of the social



ferment of the late 1960's, Summerthing served the needs of community artists very well — so well — that they did not feel the necessity to organize into strong artist groups but were able to deal with the city individually. The lack of artist control furthered by this situation left artists highly vulnerable to changes in administration or cutbacks in funding. When the political situation cooled down in the early 1970s, the money for inner-city murals with artistically strong social communication was reduced.<sup>93</sup>

As indicated above, by 1973, the riots and the militancy pervasive in cities were tapering off. The need to “cool out” certain neighborhoods and ethnicities lost its priority status for City Hall.<sup>94</sup> Then the country fell into a recession, which prompted the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) administered by the Department of Labor in 1975. Artists were employed from 1975 to 1978 as a measure against unemployment, as they had been in WPA days. The inspiration for murals was not solely community-based. During Summerthing, each artist had to meet with local groups before beginning their designs.<sup>95</sup> This was not so with the CETA-funded initiative. Even less community-based work occurred during the 1980s. Mural production slowed until a new social crisis befell Boston in the nineties: youth gangs and drugs. Enter the Boston Mural Crew. This youth-based program would be the next tide of Boston's mural movement.

### ***The Boston Mural Crew: Giving Kids a Chance***

So we did a two block area, a very commercial section of Codman Square, and in those days there were many boarded-up storefronts, tawdry little hanging-on-by-a-thread businesses; nothing that was perceived to be viable. And also, the perception was that the neighborhood was rife with gang activity because there were these tags all over the place. Our mission was to cover graffiti and they were somewhat ambivalent about that. They were like: “No, no, we can't. Those are people's ups and tags.” “Well let's take this opportunity to do art the best we can.”

— Heidi Schork, Director of the Boston Mural Crew

In 1991, the City of Boston hired artist Heidi Schork to lead a group of eight disadvantaged kids from the city to cover graffiti in the Codman Square area of Dorchester. From that one-time summer initiative, then called the Boston Youth Clean-Up Corps (BYCC), the Boston Mural Crew program (BMC) was formed. The program employs teenagers, aged fourteen to seventeen, each summer to paint murals with Schork and her staff of five professional artists, most of whom are graduates of the Massachusetts College of Art.

The only requirements are that the teens be residents of Boston and have a serious interest in art. The BMC has created more than one hundred outdoor murals since its inception.

Although there are over five thousand youths employed by the city per year, only about sixty are chosen to paint murals, “from a huge cross-section of Boston youth.”<sup>96</sup> Much like Philadelphia, yet on a smaller scale, the BMC began as a way to wipe out graffiti. In contrast, it did not collaborate with graffitiists. It did not become a full-time entity in its own right until 1997; its staff had been seasonal until then. In 1998, the program also implemented an after-school component that works on interior commissions in the winter months.

Schork began working with a second group of teenagers in the summer of 1992. They painted a memorial in African Ndebele style, which included a pre-existing graffiti list of all the teenagers who had died on the neighborhood streets. It received positive press in the *Boston Globe*. Schork told the teens at the time: “Now you see the power of art. You did something thoughtful; it brought attention to issues in the neighborhood.”<sup>97</sup> She decided that they would paint another mural, but this time she would allow the teens to choose their own subject. What Schork did not know was that this decision would test the program: it was about to wade into what could have been a political quagmire. The youths decided they wanted to paint the story of Rodney King. Schork relayed what happened:

We started to put up our sketches. It was carefully done as sort of a sequence of events: Rodney driving in his car; the cops pulling him over; the cops beating him, just from the video (the famous Rodney King beating video), and then L.A. up in flames, etc. etc. And it was very sort of stylized, totally a rip of Egyptian tomb painting. It looked great. Well, we’d been working for maybe three or four days. We came to work and there were 15 dozen cop cars surrounding the mural, and TV cameras and guys in cheap suits with microphones. The kids were like, “What’s going on?” And a city councilor came up to us and said the police want to whitewash your mural. The kids said “No. This is our expression. This is what happened.” In other words, the art took a political form for them. They were all hot on this thing: “Cops beat people all the time around here, yo.” So there was a huge, huge scandal. I’d say . . . controversy.<sup>98</sup>

As Schork tells the story, the situation got worse before it got better. But Schork, the teens, and, most importantly, the city, stood by the artwork. Schork relays the magnitude of what was happening: “The whole propaganda machine of cops versus black kids was revealed in this little instance. What a benign thing: kids painting a mural about something that happened on the other coast. But, they [the police and politicians] were very, very afraid

to think there's awareness that this could happen here or that this was an important subject for a bunch of fourteen to fifteen-year-old kids." A spokesperson for the mayor stated that the city was not going to censor "the work of young people who work for the city, that it was artistic license, self-expression, that [they] should have the right."<sup>99</sup> Ultimately, those involved learned that their expression mattered. Teenagers who had been wary of the system, and were using art to protest against police brutality, learned how to navigate the political heat of city and union politics. The BMC also learned that City Hall would not turn its back this time. This was a crucial and most unexpected lesson for the young painters.

The mere painting of a mural is not all that occurs when the BMC convenes in some of the poorest sections of Boston. First, community outreach efforts begin. Then, there is the academic research, which takes place at the Boston Public Library. Next, there are the sketches and designs. Schork clarified the process:

That's one of the things we're very careful about. You don't just show up at a wall with your paints and paint your thing. You have to really come up with an idea that's going to work and get all the reference material and do your research, so that you can justify your work and talk about it when whomever says "What are you doing?" Two or three days at the BPL, gathering information, then days drawing it out. That's the key thing that separates our murals out. We always have a plan.<sup>100</sup>

Besides an arts education, the BMC provides the teenagers with opportunities to develop social skills and establish contacts that they otherwise might not have. Schork commented how important this is:

If you're a poor kid growing up in the city, your area of knowledge is teeny. You might know a few streets around your way, and maybe the mall or something else. But what goes on in another part of the city is just totally alien and goes further to isolate and territorialize Boston, which is truly territorial. You don't cross the line if you're from this part of the city, and so on.<sup>101</sup>

This is part of what makes mural painting such an innovative way to employ teenagers. It is not simply a job. It presents one way to infuse social capital in a population that is isolated and at risk of falling into a lifestyle of crime and disorder. And most importantly, it interests the youths themselves, as Schork can attest:

One point of view is to lock up kids because they do get involved in gangs. The other issue is why do they get involved in gangs? They'd like to do something; they want to be doing stuff that's cool. And what is cool? There is nothing cooler, if you're a teenager, than painting a giant painting on a street corner for the whole world to see, and doing it with your pals. And so you find a way to make that seem so much more attractive than doing nothing.<sup>102</sup>



Schork added: "I have never turned anyone away. I believe that even those kids who might not technically be 'at risk' may be at risk of not succeeding because they have not had a positive work experience or positive school experience."<sup>103</sup> When asked how kids are recruited she stated: "We do interview all candidates, but that is a mere formality and primarily so that the kids know what they are getting into. It is no fun at all to spend long hours in the hot sun if you don't at least like to paint. Our murals, however, totally serve 'underserved neighborhoods.' And they are the best way for us to recruit kids."<sup>104</sup>

The teenagers who work for the BMC quickly learn the same lesson Schork herself had to accept when she began the program almost twelve years ago: "You have to be very aware of the nuances of Boston city politics in order to be able to do what I did. You have to know the mood and the tenor of each neighborhood and what the perception is in the neighborhood about the people who are not from there and how to get around that."<sup>105</sup> This idea of underexposed kids getting out and reaching across geographical barriers is central to the program's philosophy. Schork retold the story of one summer, when a group of African-American boys from Roxbury were teamed with Italian girls from the North End to paint a mural in each neighborhood.

These kids had been working five weeks together they were totally bonded. The first day in the North End, some of the girls' pals were like: "What's going on here? You gonna paint about Africa?" . . . And I was like, "No, not at all, why would we paint about Africa in the North End? We're going to do a mural about the festivals of the saints' feast days." The [North End] kids were like: "Well, we're going to come and check." And every day, we'd have a little audience of kids. In this building we were painting, they had senior citizens' bingo three days a week . . . to the gills with little old Italian ladies from the North End . . . so they'd come out of bingo and be like: "Oh my god, Madonna Della Cava! This is wonderful!" And they became our next level of audience. They would be out there every single day to watch us saying, "You know in Italy, they do this all the time." They became our pals. When we were finished, one of the little old ladies came up to me and said "You know, your kids did such a good job and they're such nice kids, we'd like to do something for them. What can we do?" I said, "Feed them."

The next day they came and said "We have a plan. We'd like to serve them lunch and we're gonna have the priest from St. Leonard's Church come and bless the mural and we'll have a big party." So, a week later we had this big event. Oh my god, there were check tablecloths and homemade manicotti and all these beautiful little anisette cookies and lemonade. These little old ladies from the basement served the "homies" lunch. It was wonderful. They all made friends. Now the kids from Roxbury and Dorchester had never ever been to the North End! Maybe once on a field trip to the Paul Revere House. We were creating art and they were welcomed. It became

irrelevant the gang issue — “We’re the tough white boys from the North End.” They became pals because they were having such a great time.<sup>106</sup>

Schork relayed this story to explain what mural art can really do to “build community.”<sup>107</sup> She concluded with the following: “Things do happen. That’s what can happen. People can relax. What can be more basic than a bunch of people sitting around having lunch together? It seems like such a simple concept but to get that to happen in a way that is relaxed and comfortable is very difficult.”<sup>108</sup> Mural art — in contrast to the “Honor Diversity” banner that hangs in so many Main Streets across the country — actually does honor diversity. Through the community exchange, it has a way of creating it. Teens become artists and diplomats. Neighbors become critics. In any case, it is the art — the public spectacle of creation — that brings people on the street together to start talking, people who otherwise might not have a starting point for conversation.





## CONCLUSIONS:

### THE POWER AND PURPOSE OF URBAN CANVAS

By themselves, murals cannot produce fundamental social, economic, or political change, but they can instigate change by educating people about the scourges which plague social order. ...Controversy has always been a part of the mural process and it makes sense that controversial ideas expressed in murals can play a central role in the education process.

— David R. Conrad, in “Educating with Community Murals”<sup>109</sup>

#### *Impact on Youth-at-Risk: The Process of Creating Art*

As previously discussed, once city administrators in Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles realized the potential benefits of mural art, they began incorporating it into municipal agendas. In fact, most of the mural programs and projects started across the country (particularly in the early nineties) began as political strategies to reach underserved youth. Boston and Philadelphia began their programs as a way to combat graffiti; Los Angeles used the art form to bring gang members together. Still, debate continues as to what these programs can actually do to inspire troubled and distrustful urban youth. When confronted with the idea that individuals are skeptical about the efficacy of mural art, Ariel Bierbaum, Assistant Director of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, responded: “Those people need to read youth development literature. The youth development literature on arts education is overwhelming.”<sup>110</sup> More than thirty years ago, muralist Mark Rogovin laid out the efficacy for youth-based mural arts programs. His theory is applicable today.

The experience gained through mural painting—the process of discussion, planning, and collective creativity—are an exceptional learning opportunity for students. Mural projects teach many skills at the same time, including social, as well as creative and technical. They teach responsibility to others, to the project and to the public. Students will learn about themselves through working with others. They also enjoy the sense of doing something for the people who will see the mural. Students will learn sensitivity to people by seeking a theme that will be meaningful to others. In the process of doing a mural, the student, perhaps for the first time, will have a role in creating or changing his or her environment.<sup>111</sup>

Recent national evaluations on youth arts programming seem to echo Rogovin’s findings. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), in conjunction with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), conducted a national study on the benefits that at-risk youth receive from arts programming. The evaluation studied the

YouthARTS Development Project, which included programs in Atlanta, Georgia; Portland, Oregon; and San Antonio, Texas. Though not limited to the mural arts, the programs focused on collaborative arts training. The Atlanta program, known as “Art-at-Work,” was a partnership between the Fulton County Arts Council and the Fulton County Juvenile Court. Its objectives were to provide participants with the following:<sup>112</sup>

- Improved art and employment skills (e.g., goal setting, communication, sales/marketing).
- Opportunities to use new skills to produce, exhibit, and sell their own art.
- Opportunities to display artwork and receive public recognition for their work.
- Exposure to career opportunities in the arts.
- Opportunities to develop positive relationships with adult role models and peers.
- Improved or increased self-esteem, pride, discipline, commitment, responsibility, and attitudes about school and the future.
- Increased prosocial behavior and reduced alienation from others.

According to the evaluation, several of those goals were met through arts training:

Feedback from the probation officers tends to suggest Art-at-Work had a positive impact on the attitudes and behaviors of youth. Probation officers noted that youth who participated in the program demonstrated increased self-esteem and an increased sense of accomplishment and pride and showed improved relationships with their peers and family members. They also believed the program was valuable because, in addition to being a fun, safe, and challenging after-school activity, it enhanced future opportunities for some participants by providing skills that will help them academically and vocationally.<sup>113</sup>

The NEA called this evaluation “landmark national research.” Then-Chairman Bill Ivey stated: “Participation in the arts can be that positive, engaging vehicle that sparks the imagination of our children, making a difference in their lives and deterring them from violence and drugs.”<sup>114</sup>

To date, the Boston Mural Crew has not been evaluated. Schork recalled an informal encounter, however, that illustrated the difference mural painting made in the life of a former BMC painter:

One of them sits next to me every week. Her daughter goes to Boston Ballet the same time my daughter does. I hadn’t seen her in years. She’s all grown up, a nurse. She was the wildest one in the bunch. This is a kid whose world was so far removed from

all this and she said “Working with you that summer created such a different world of possibilities for me. I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing. My kid wouldn’t be coming to ballet. We wouldn’t be going to the museum. All of those things that you made a normal part of our lives.”<sup>115</sup>

Schork concluded with: “Now, not all of them were successful. But at least one person [became] a patron of the arts. That’s cool.”<sup>116</sup>

Not all artists fully support the BMC. Some criticize youth-based programs, stating that the more prolific those projects become in a city, the fewer opportunities there will be for professional commissions. Jameel Parker, a muralist who runs a program called “Teen Portfolio,” which prepares minority teenagers from Boston for college admission to arts schools, stated that many minority neighborhoods are now “muraled out” with “low-budget, cheap murals.”<sup>117</sup> His comments highlight an important question: If city dollars are limited, should they be spent on commissioned works or youth programming? It should be noted that although Teen Portfolio has a 100 percent success rate for getting young, mostly African-American, teens into college art programs, Parker himself admits that the children selected do not have any “behavioral problems.”<sup>118</sup>

The most significant power of mural art programs transcends the debate over funding, quality, and even providing underserved youth with arts training. It literally can “save lives,” as Jane Golden has stated. Dana Chandler has come to the same understanding after first having called then a “feel good thing.”

You cannot mistake the value of having them [kids] wield a brush instead of a gun. You just can’t. And if that [mural art] is a methodology of keeping them occupied with something other than the senseless violence they are being taught by people I think are in collusion with drug lords and gun-runners, then I think it’s wonderful. I think that’s wonderful.<sup>119</sup>

### ***Murals as Memorials: Denouncing Violence With a Brush***

And it’s like a deterrent, to tell these kids that that’s not the way to go. And maybe, just maybe, if people can get that idea, they might stop and think before they go out and do something horrendous. . . to bring pain to another person, or to rob them . . . and that’s the idea. I thought the wall could be a way to keep these kids alive, through their portraits, and give their families a chance to live as well. Because they won’t be in so much pain because their children weren’t forgotten.

— Sandy Spicer, regarding the *Families Are Victims Too* mural <sup>120</sup>



Survival is an inherent theme of projects that have become known as “memorial murals.” Chandler commented on the effect of memorial murals in urban centers, not just for at-risk youth, but adults, and society, in general:

That’s the only way these kids will be remembered; otherwise no one will ever know they were alive. I mean that’s really the literal truth. How many people remember the kids who were actually killed? We remember the numbers...we remember the pictures of their bodies...but we don’t remember them. It’s one good way to have people be able to relate to a face, a person. So in that sense, I think it’s excellent. Now, do I think that’s something that should occur in every urban area? Absolutely. While the overriding number of kids who are murdering themselves are African American and Latino, there are other kids who are dying too and there should be memorials painted for those children. I think we never need forget as a culture that we as adults are the reason that these children are dead. Because they don’t make the guns and they don’t make the bullets and they don’t transport those kinds of things into the communities and they don’t allow easy access to these things through their own stupidity. I think it’s good that there be those memorials. I think it’s good that there are kids out there painting them. The more children who are painting that, the less children who will be out there shooting. I think that’s great.<sup>121</sup>

Memorial murals are also painted as professional commissioned works. Parker recounted the time when he painted the “South End Honor Roll” and was approached by a young boy from the neighborhood whose sister had AIDS.

There was this one boy who was like twenty-years old and he came up and asked me to put his sister on the wall. She had HIV. He was walking around with this picture of this little girl, probably eight years old. “My sister has AIDS. My stepfather had given it to my mother, and my mom gave it to my sister.” He was really broken up about the whole thing.<sup>122</sup>

Parker concluded: “to be able accommodate and validate his experience was a great thing. It was like making a memorial to his sister that hadn’t [yet] died. When you do community murals, that’s what it’s all about. [It] makes a lot of difference to that kid who walks by the mural everyday.”<sup>123</sup>

Some have theorized that these memorials glorify rather than denounce violence, since in the past, memorial murals had been reserved for great leaders. In Philadelphia, Ariel Bierbaum countered: “They’re effective because the process by which they are created does not focus on the individual who was killed, and whether or not they were involved in a drug exchange. The focus is that there are people who are universally feeling a loss. And the mural serves as a cathartic: the mural-making process, the painting process, and finally the dedication, where it’s publicly unveiled.”<sup>124</sup> Lohman’s research dealt

heavily with one such mural in Southwest Philadelphia, entitled *Families Are Victims Too* (FAVT). It memorializes fifteen teenagers from the immediate neighborhood who were killed by gang and drug-related violence. The mural was the idea of Sandy and Garnet Spicer, who after losing two sons to street violence, co-founded a community group for other grieving parents.

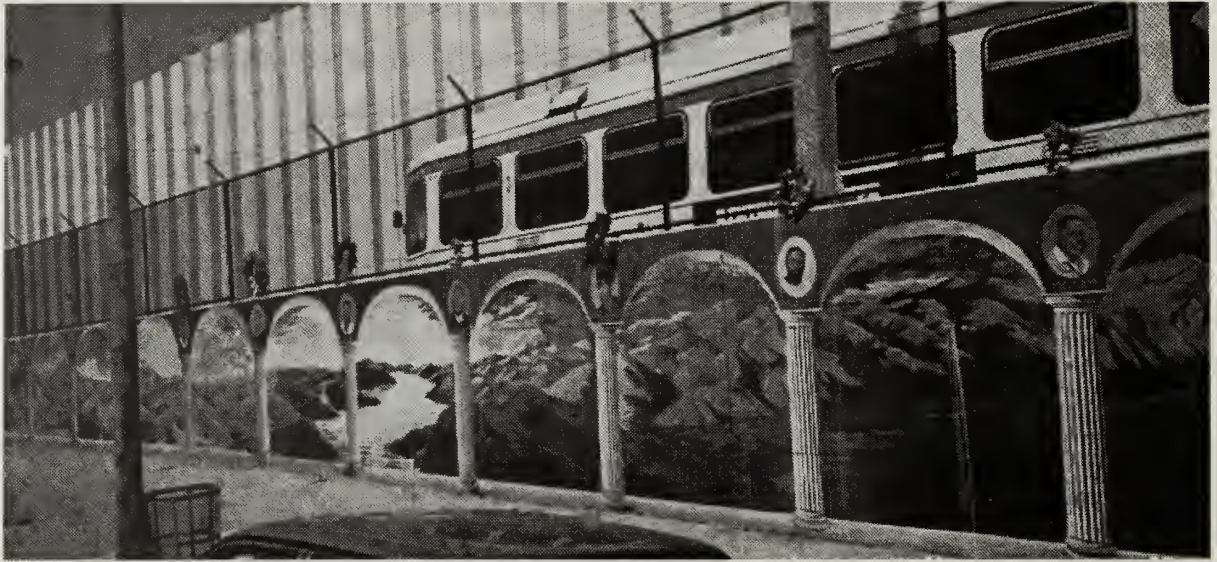
While on a tour of the murals in this neighborhood, I met Mrs. Spicer. She stopped our trolley, which was taking a group of middle school children on a mural tour. Mrs. Spicer invited the children to return to the mural in a few weeks because FAVT was planning a festival to “celebrate life” at the memorial site. She told the group that if they had any talents they wished to share (singing or dancing), they could perform that day. This chance exchange reminded me of what I had read about the paradoxes of the FAVT mural: “While to the ‘outsider’ the mural is primarily about *death*, for the victims’ families and loved ones, the mural is fundamentally about *life*. While the outsider experiences the memorial to those who died, the parents view the mural as a memorial to those that [sic] lived.”<sup>125</sup>



Sandy Spicer in front of the *Families Are Victims Too* mural

The FAVT mural provides an impressive lesson about the mural and its place in the community. As Jane Golden stated at the mural’s dedication: “It is a place where people can congregate, share their stories, express their grief, and provide each other with mutual support. . . . And through the collaborative process of doing this mural here, what has happened is hope has been reborn.”<sup>126</sup>





Barbara Smolen, *Families Are Victims Too*, 1999

The prevalence of memorial murals in Philadelphia, as Lohman writes, also has impressed upon children a “highly developed understanding of what it means to be ‘on the wall.’” Quoting Sandy Spicer, he wrote: “They have this saying, it’s like a threat, they say, ‘Don’t make me put you on the wall!’ or ‘If you don’t watch yourself, you’re going up on the wall.’”<sup>127</sup> The *FAVT* mural also has become part of the neighborhood’s crime prevention program, spearheaded by the parent group and local police. One officer “periodically brings juvenile offenders by the *FAVT* mural, telling them: ‘This wall is a beautiful thing, but you don’t want to be up there.’”<sup>128</sup>

### ***Building Community: The Collaborative Process***

What is of profound importance about these murals is that they represent a fundamental change in the relation of culture to ordinary people. Instead of having “fine art” denied them by a cultivated elite or imposed on them by well-meaning educators, instead of being swamped by the public relations of the establishment and the commercial art of advertisers, neighborhood people are developing a community-based culture that gives them the means to represent their existence as they know it, and if they so decide, to act to change it. These murals are freeing ordinary people from ways of seeing that are not their own and helping them to take control of their perceptions, which is necessary to taking charge of their own lives. This painting is in fact the most democratic art America has produced. It has become customary to refer to it as art of, by, and for the people not as isolated individuals, but in their cooperative activities, as they identify with organizations, communities, trade unions, ethnic groups, or humanity as a whole.

— Alan Barnett, *Community Murals*



Murals are not simply art; they are action. The process of creating murals, if they are to be meaningful and to survive, must include community participation. This can take many forms. Artist and writer Tim Drescher cautions muralists about the need to create inclusion, in addition to artistry: “But if the only thing we do is paint murals, we miss the important political opportunities. We must work in conjunction with others on many levels in a multifaceted community. In the end, murals or other community arts are best seen as part of a larger plan of community organizing and not something in themselves.”<sup>129</sup> As Bierbaum also was quick to point out, “Mural art on its own does not build community, but if you construct a process around the creation of mural art, it does.”<sup>130</sup>

Involving community members in the mural process is not always easy or positive. Rollins writes:

There’s this romantic idea that making art in the community is a transcendent, uplifting experience. Well, a lot of times it isn’t. To be honest, it can be a real pain in the ass. You have to deal with sponsors and committees and self-appointed representatives of the community more than the actual people living here. And often these representatives and their bureaucracy are seriously out of touch with the sensibility of their constituents.<sup>131</sup>

David Fichter alluded to this when he stated that the community process occasionally is “fake.”<sup>132</sup> When it is genuine, however, it creates more than public art. Fichter’s mural, *The Potluck*, as depicted on the following page, is a multi-cultural view of the Area IV Neighborhood in the City of Cambridge. He said it represents “an imaginary potluck, if the whole neighborhood got together.” To gain community input, Fichter “went to a bunch of potlucks in the neighborhood, mostly in churches.” His interaction with neighbors became even more intense when he began to paint, “people just kept asking me to put their portraits in, so I kept putting more and more.” He elaborated on what this meant to him as an artist, and how mural painting could be defended as a way to strengthen community relations:

Well, that’s part of the fun and the exhaustion of the process. To me the material is the wall, which I think of as urban canvas. It even has the texture like canvas magnified. And the environment: the people...the good, the bad, and the ugly...Reverend Love lobbying to have his portrait painted...He was fun...to the drunks who harass you, to the people who are really appreciative, to the kids who want their picture painted. There’s something powerful about that regardless of even the act of the painting. Somebody asks you if they can be painted, immortalized so to speak. The fact that you can do that makes you feel that you’re doing something. And you know, today I still run into people that I painted and we reconnect — people who

had jobs and are now homeless. It's certainly the reason I wanted to do it. It felt like a great way to connect with my neighborhood.<sup>133</sup>



David Fichter, *The Potluck*, 1994 (photo by Jeremy Marin)

The mural process is an exchange between artists (whether commissioned or employed by youth programs) and the neighborhood. In the exchange, a social contract is created; responsibility is born among strangers. Fichter touched on this concept: "It's like an act of faith too. It [the mural] is vulnerable. It's not protected by museum guards or anything, and that mural has never been touched. In a sense, that's it: you've made this act of faith that somehow it will survive. And the reward is that it does."<sup>134</sup> The artist may paint, but it is the community who protects the wall long after the scaffolding is dismantled. Muralists hold this as one of the key factors for a painting's longevity: "Generally speaking," writes Tim Drescher, "if a mural is the product of its immediate community, it will not be defaced, let alone destroyed."<sup>135</sup> The community simultaneously acts as audience and participant. Jameel Parker retold a story about his *Gang Peace* mural, which was graffitied precisely because the community saw it as a backdrop for their mourning.



This boy named Dominic Mount got murdered in front of the mural, while [it was being painted]. The following day, you could see ...when a person gets killed, especially a young person, they make these makeshift memorials with candles and other stuff. So I dedicated this mural to 'Poochi' [Dominic's nickname]. Then people started tagging up 'I love you Poochi' all along the mural. It wasn't to deface it, but [to say] "I love you."<sup>136</sup>

When Parker returned to restore the mural a few years later, he was approached by some concerned and aggressive local youths. "When you have a piece of public art that the community owns, you have to be really careful. When I was going to do the restoration project, I had young adults coming up to me [saying]: 'What are you doing with the mural? I hope you're not messing [with it].' It was kind of scary because if I was going to start painting over it, I was going to have some physical problems."<sup>137</sup> When community members feel a sense of ownership for a mural, they act to protect it. This can happen even when the project is not painted by community members themselves, as was the case with *Gang Peace*.

Whether the work is painted by professions or youth participants, it will enhance the community only if its creators consider their audience and adjust the mural's content accordingly. In Philadelphia, they have mastered this concept. Most projects consult the community. In fact, MAP coordinates the negotiations:

We have a series of meetings with just us and the community, the artists and the communities, and then the artist and their designs for the community. We're back and forth in there anywhere from a month to longer. Some projects take a year before the paintings even begin. I'm there to facilitate the relationship between the artists and the community during the design phase, and then when the design is presented, to both advocate for the community's vision while advocating for the artist's artistic integrity . . . so that the artists understand that the community's vision needs to be maintained and that the community understands that certain elements need to be kept or changed depending on higher artistic concepts.<sup>138</sup>

Negotiations can be intense and difficult. Amy Sananman, Director of the Groundswell Mural Project in Brooklyn, New York, explained how difficult community involvement can become. Artists, administrators, youth participants, and city officials never know when a community project will become controversial.

The tricky thing that we've learned and had to deal with is when something you're not expecting to be controversial becomes controversial, and what do you do. It's interesting because, at first, it was something kind of "Oh, wow, how are we going to deal with this? It's a bad thing that this is controversial." But in the end, it turned out to be a really great thing. The mural was taken down. That mural is gone. So it really raised issues of what is a successful mural? Is it one that's up forever or one that people don't have an issue with? Or is it one that's up for a hundred days but is in all



the newspapers and on all the television stations because it brings people out onto the street and talking? It's an interesting question and I don't think there's an answer. I think it's different for every project.<sup>139</sup>

Often a successful mural becomes part of the community, transcending its themes to become a marker, whether physical or emotional, for the neighborhood. For example, the BMC obtains most of its mural sites through an informal scouting process, enlisting private building and business owners to “host” murals. Not only can murals improve surroundings, the public art makes businesses more identifiable, described by Heidi Schork and shown below.

A lot of small business owners appreciate having a mural on their building because it draws attention to a place that otherwise might have just disappeared along the street. All of the sudden if you've got a giant mural on the side of your building that sort of relates to your potential customers or people in the neighborhood: “My place is the place that has the big thing on it” or “Stop when you see the big mural, because that's where it is.”<sup>140</sup>

Community-based murals become common ground for people who might not ordinarily interact. The process of design and painting presents something to discuss, argue about, protest, or praise. Artist and community become engaged in a way that doesn't often happen without provocation. If a mural is mere décor, then it shortchanges its surroundings. If a community is unwilling to participate, then the mural's worth is lessened.

The role of the artists isn't to decorate the surroundings. . . . [T]he artist should be allowed to work with the community as equal partner. And artists have to be smart enough to build in structures for social participation *as part* of their artwork. The artist can show the community what skills it already possesses to create its own culture, while the community can direct the artist towards the ideas, forms, and contents that really matter to the people. It takes both a good artist and a good community to understand this.<sup>141</sup>

### ***Transforming Blight and Social Disorder***

We must keep in mind that the counter side to hope is despair. Frequently, the latter surfaces more quickly than expected.

— Elaine A. King in “Art, Politics, and Ethnicity”<sup>142</sup>

The last municipal function of community-based mural paintings is to combat blight. Cities are concerned with reducing blight because it is often perceived as a sign of social disorder. Commonly referred to as the “broken windows thesis,” the theory is as follows: “Even such minor public incivilities as drinking in the street, spray-painting graffiti, and

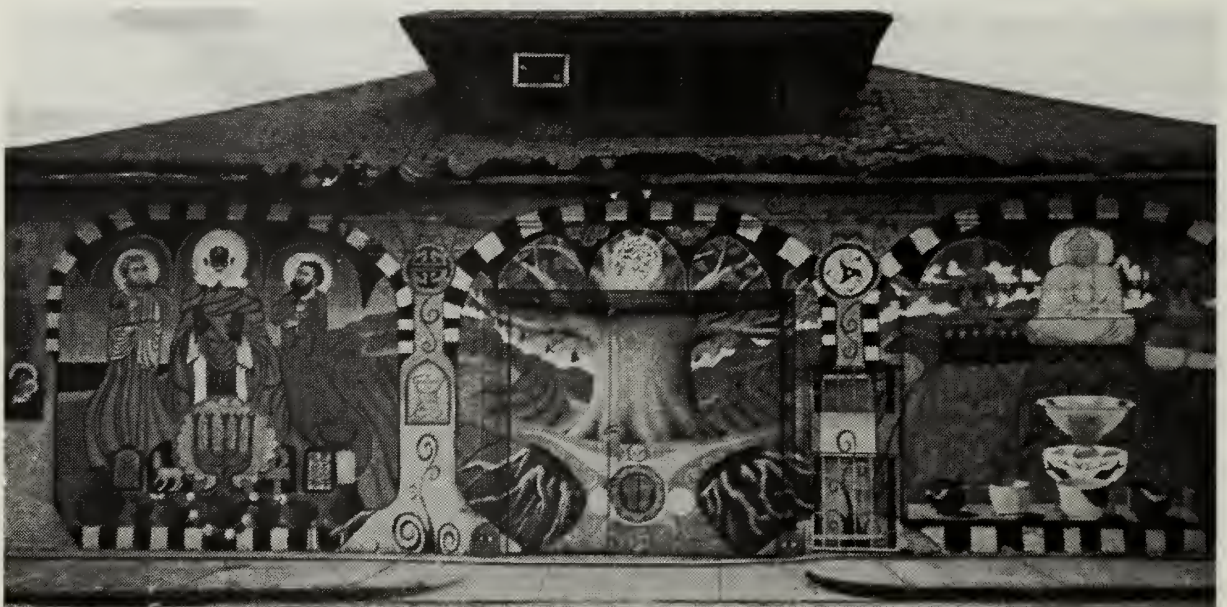
breaking windows can escalate into predatory crime because prospective offenders assume from these manifestations of disorder that area residents are indifferent to what happens in their neighborhoods.”<sup>143</sup> There is an undeniable link between mural painting and efforts to abolish graffiti, whether or not artists agree that the art form should be used in this way. Regardless, the fact that murals can ward off graffiti has become one of its biggest selling points to cities, including the three investigated in this case study.

Cities must remember, however, that the reduction of blight occurs, not because of the mural, but because of its process. The communal feelings of ownership and shared responsibility for protecting the murals, as discussed in the previous section, apply here as well. After a mural is completed, if residents have been an integral part of its creation, they will watch over the painting. Lohman called this a neighborhood’s “central curatorial role.”<sup>144</sup> The mural is shared public property and its collective caretaking inspires trust and cooperation within the neighborhood. Greater concern about one’s physical surroundings can help to prevent social disorder. “Where there is cohesion and mutual trust among neighbors, the likelihood is greater that they will share a willingness to intervene for the common good. This link of cohesion and trust with shared expectations for intervening has been termed ‘collective efficacy,’ a key social process proposed . . . as an inhibitor of both crime and disorder.”<sup>145</sup>

There are also critics of the notion that mural programs can reduce blight. Although Chandler concedes that the BMC’s efforts “pretty up a lot of neighborhoods,” he states that murals cannot “take the place of, for instance, better city vehicles for the rapid transit that don’t pollute the neighborhoods. [It] doesn’t take the place of fixing streets that have more potholes than they need to have. It doesn’t take the place of better city services. . . .”<sup>146</sup> Philadelphia’s program has been criticized as well. Some opponents believe that murals are a sign of neighborhood problems rather than a solution. Lohman writes that since the majority of the program’s murals have been painted in low-income areas, “many city residents view the presence of murals in neighborhoods as an indicator of ‘blight.’”<sup>147</sup> In reference to this criticism of the MAP murals, Bierbaum responded, “We don’t only paint in underserved neighborhoods. The public perception of murals as being ghetto art is definitely changing and shifting in a major way. When we announced our new mural application, we got twice as many [applications including many from affluent neighborhoods].”<sup>148</sup>



Murals also can become ethnic markers. Indeed, Heidi Schork admitted that the predominant ethnicity of a community helps the BMC to decide what will “work” in a given neighborhood. Cities sometimes use murals as to celebrate their diverse ethnic populations. By marketing mural projects in neighborhoods, cities can extend the notion of community beyond geographical borders, at the same time dispelling the myth that murals are ghetto art. Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and San Francisco stand as models for marketing murals as cultural tourism. These cities operate guided mural tours in neighborhoods tourists might not know about, normally avoid, or might be advised to avoid. Bringing “outsiders” into an economically-depressed urban area could change the perception that it is dangerous. Although tourists’ visits are short-term, an increased interest in such neighborhoods might affect the perceptions of current and potential long-term residents. In deciding to showcase mural neighborhoods to tourists, cities might then also increase services to those areas, further assisting physical improvements. Lastly, abandoned buildings often become sites for mural paintings. Though this may be what Chandler meant by neighborhoods being “prettied up,” the artwork certainly functions to reduce the eyesore of decrepit buildings. On the next page, are photographs of two murals painted by the BMC on abandoned property. The first is called the “Temple of Good Vibes,” located on Geneva Avenue in the Grove Hall section of Dorchester. The project served as a lesson in religious imagery. The teenage muralists sought to “create sacred ground” within the blighted area.<sup>149</sup>



BMC, directed by Heidi Schork & Marshall Dackert, *Temple of Good Vibes*, 2000



The mural below is *The Blues Wall* on Warren Avenue in Roxbury. Prior to painting, the teens were required to research the history of Jazz. In the middle of the doorway, directly above the hanging chair is the slogan: “You gotta pay your dues.” The mural and its message are far more affirming than the sight of the boarded-up store.



BMC, directed by Heidi Schork & Teig Grennan *The Blues Wall*, 1995

The murals depicted above and on the previous page serve as examples of how mural arts should and must be integrated within the urban landscape to be meaningful: they should beautify surroundings while serving an educational or sociopolitical purpose. To be truly effective, mural projects must involve at-risk youth and community members. Mural paintings are inanimate, but they reflect the energy of their creators, as well as the neighborhood residents who live among them. The multiple functions of urban murals suggest a range of innovative possibilities for community development policy and youth-based programming. Mural art policies be developed to exploit the power and purpose of urban canvas. A meaningless public mural is a missed opportunity. Policymakers must let community-based murals be their muse. Many of these projects have inspired ingenuity in urban neighborhoods, so too, could they succeed in the realm of public policy.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

### *Funding for the Arts: Public Budgeting and Economics*

*The Massachusetts Legislature should consider reinstating the “percent for art” requirement that new construction projects use a portion of their construction money for the arts.* According to Ricardo Barreto, Director of the UrbanArts Institute at the Massachusetts College of Art, since the early 1980s, Boston has been one of the “few major cities in the country, if not the only one in the country, that does not have any kind of public art policy provision. . . . Legislation was passed that did away with the requirement for new construction costs containing a percentage for public art. . . . Nobody is obligated to spend money on the arts.”<sup>150</sup> In the current budget climate where the arts and human services are taking the biggest cut, a new legislative mechanism for funding is undoubtedly a difficult short-term sell. Yet, as Barreto suggests, there must be someone with the political will to fight this battle.

Barreto suggests emulating a nearby community’s funding policy: “Cambridge is the one exception. Cambridge, since the early seventies, has had a percent for art program. They put us to shame in terms of what’s done outside of Cambridge.”<sup>151</sup> When asked what changes would need to happen in Boston to initiate new funding mechanisms, Barreto stated: “It may be politically possible to start talking about that now. The Big Dig may be a catalyst for that conversation. I think it’s becoming clear to people now that a lot of that tension of what will happen with design and the new open land that’s created would be much further along if there were a policy.”<sup>152</sup>

*The City should resist slashing arts funding and summer jobs for youth.* The City of Boston could resist cutting the budget for the Cultural Affairs, which includes arts funding. The FY 2003 budget cycle included an overall 32.4 percent reduction for the Office of Cultural Affairs. The BMC was transferred from Parks and Recreation to Cultural Affairs at that time. Though the program’s staff will most likely be reduced, there should be money allocated for summer mural jobs in 2003. The Mayor himself conceded to the *Boston Globe*, “When kids have a lot of free time to hang-out in the summer, they get bored and tend to



create mischief.”<sup>153</sup> A Boston Youth Services study was more explicit, predicting a “marked increase in youth crime and ‘delinquency’ without summer programs.”

*The BMC should market itself to private donors.* Though the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program is administered by the city, it has nonprofit status. It engages in private fundraising. According to Kevin Gardner, MAP’s Director of Finance, 33 percent of the program’s budget comes from the city, 8 percent comes from other sources of funding including grants, and the remaining 59 percent comes from “foundations, corporate sponsors, individual contributions, product sales (postcards and calendars), and revenue raised from mural tours.”<sup>154</sup> It is this portion of funding that could sustain a mural program even during an economic downturn. The BMC currently has no product sales or for-pay tours. Its total budget has been approximated at \$330,000. Philadelphia’s operating budget is well over \$1 million, and according to Gardner, “not anticipating budget cuts in 2003.”<sup>155</sup>

*Boston should recognize the mural arts as a potential component of cultural tourism and as a viable revenue producer.* Ricardo Barreto stated the following about marketing public arts as tourism:

Boston and Massachusetts could do much better in terms of how they sell the cultural communities and activities through their tourism and convention and visitors’ bureaus. [Although] there’s some attempt at that, there’s still not really an understanding on the part of the tourism industry per se about how they can use the arts and cultural activity to really sell the area. There’s some understanding, but it’s very primitive compared to other states.<sup>156</sup>

Martha Jones, who was heading the Massachusetts Advocates for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities’ (MAASH) lobbying efforts, expressed the same opinion to the *Boston Globe*.

Cities and areas of the country that boast a bevy of cultural attractions, such as San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, and New York, support them with “revenue streams” devoted specifically to culture . . . . Why Massachusetts doesn’t have one is beyond the realm of understanding. Boston, by state law, cannot impose a meal or hotel tax to support the arts.<sup>157</sup>

The community-based murals painted both by the BMC and professional muralists in and around Boston are rich in multicultural content. Boston would do well to follow the examples other cities set by marketing mural tours, while considering a trade-off Ariel Bierbaum mentioned: “We don’t want to divert precious resources away from programming for marketing [efforts]. We don’t want to overspend on public relations and compromise the integrity of the work we’re doing.”<sup>158</sup>

The Boston Cultural Agenda Fund (BCAF) awards grants between \$3,000 and \$15,000 to conduct projects in the arts, humanities, and interpretive sciences for the benefit of Boston residents and visitors.”<sup>159</sup> In its mission statement, the BCAF stated that its fund would support projects that:

- Promote cultural tourism by attracting local, regional, national, and/or international visitors to attend Boston-based cultural activities;
- Support the role of cultural activity in community development;
- Develop new sources of revenue such as audience building, long-range fiscal planning, earned income development, and or organizational visibility.

The BMC program already supports the role of cultural activity in community development. A developed mural arts policy could further the BMC program as a vehicle to promote the other cultural and economic goals cited above.

### ***Exposure: Public Management, Lobbying, and Statistics***

*The BMC would benefit from greater exposure in the public and political realms.* I was unaware that Boston had a substantial amount of mural art when I began my research. An assistant to the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, upon learning this case study was about the way cities use the mural arts, directed me to the UrbanArts Institute, without mentioning the BMC. The BMC should promote itself in media, as well as political circles. A recent article in the *Boston Globe* discussed graffiti in Mission Hill and the city’s Graffiti Busters program, which operates on a \$300,000 budget to erase graffiti.<sup>160</sup> Yet, there was no mention of the BMC’s efforts. The BMC’s mission would be assisted by the collection of statistics on how many murals have been painted to cover graffiti and how many have been successful in eliminating graffiti.

I realize that this is not the sole burden of the BMC. City government should take greater interest in developing this program. When I asked Heidi Schork about mural arts policy initiatives, she said, “There’s no policy creation or memos sent to the Mayor. Nothing like, ‘You know, Mayor Menino, next time you’re in Chicago, maybe you should check this out. Wouldn’t this be a great thing to bring to Boston?’”<sup>161</sup> Although the city might not be examining other mural arts programs, there are cities looking to emulate Boston’s. City officials in Sydney, Australia are using the BMC program as a project design.<sup>162</sup>

*Boston's arts organizations need to increase their lobbying and organizational efforts.* This would serve to clarify goals in the arts community as well as increase coalition power. It seems that many arts organizations, such as Artists for Humanity, for example, share the same commitment to both youth-based and community programming, but there is little collaboration.

### ***Academic Research: Program Evaluation and Historical Significance***

*BMC should be evaluated as a program.* Research findings would assist the BMC in proving its efficacy. If the merits of the mural program were evaluated, and findings were disseminated, funding might be more easily secured and protected.

*A comprehensive history of Boston's mural movement must be written.* There is an abundance of historical literature regarding muralism on the West Coast, in New York, and Philadelphia. The fact that Boston's Summerthing program was one of the first of its kind to receive national funding is not well known, even within the mural community. Knowledge of Boston's contribution to the contemporary mural movement would raise awareness of the city's public art initiatives, then and now.

### ***The Public-Private Space Debate: Community Building and Conflict Resolution***

*Policies, either programmatic or municipal, which delineate community participation for mural projects, must be developed.* Even Philadelphia does not have a written policy on the protocol for community input meetings. Such a policy obviously would have to be developed as a guideline, not as a rigid procedure, but it could highlight techniques for assuring democratic and civil community meetings. As previously discussed, the framework that Ferguson and Stoutland established is one applicable prototype.<sup>163</sup> Mural programs need to establish alliances for community development at the following levels: the grassroots (level zero), frontline organizations (level one), local policymakers/government (level two), and national government/organizations (level three). By engaging these parties, alliances become strengthened, thereby forging solid commitments between far-reaching constituencies.



*Boston should sponsor both commissioned works and youth-based programs.*

A balance between professional and youth-apprentice art must be struck. Both Philadelphia and Los Angeles have succeeded by separating and funding both types of projects. MAP and SPARC have established boards to consult on and oversee projects, fundraise, and lobby. Board members include artists, politicians, and business leaders. This facilitates networking and enables a wide perspective for decision-making.

*Policymakers must establish protections for artists to ward off censorship and exploitation of murals.* This is often left unlegislated. It is vital to protect the livelihood and creativity of all artists. Those who create public art are no less deserving of such rights than those whose work can be seen in high-end galleries and museums. Of course, since murals are in the public domain, they are likely to be photographed. Mural centers in San Francisco and Los Angeles make it clear to tourists that the photos they take should not be sold. This is one way to clarify that although this art belongs to the public, it was created by the imaginative and physical labor of the artist. As this case study has proven, mural art, although street art, is valuable in immeasurable ways; therefore, it should be protected, preserved, and promoted.



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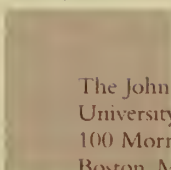
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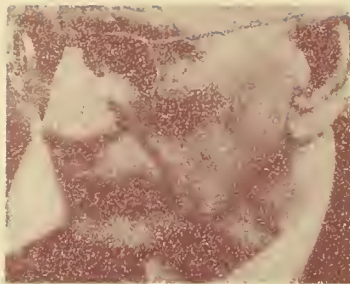
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